



Migration and mental health

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Loss

I grieve missing country

I cry loving home.

Stopping midst sky, mount and sea

I feel deep within all, all alone

Thanh-Quan

In my family's first few years in this country, we knew all the other Goan families and in two of the families the women experienced mental illness.

One of them took her own life and the other has had an ongoing experience of mental illness. I wonder in hindsight if that is what led me to work in the mental health field and in particular to have an interest in maternal mental health and in the impact of migration on mental health. This week I attended the Asian women's health symposium which led me to think about the unique issues that face migrants and women in particular.

Migration is a stressful life event and the stresses of migration include the need to learn a new language, new ways of life and new social values and norms. These all require effort and without them the migrant's ability to function effectively is compromised. Successfully coping with activities that were accomplished easily takes a great deal of effort in a new country and can result in overload and fatigue. Additional challenges include the ambiguity of one's social role and a decrease in social status. Migration

can also result in the loss of traditional and specific practices and beliefs, including those that assist migrants to maintain their mental health.

I would like to use the idea of 'buckets', taken from the work of Tom Rath, Donald Clifton (and Dr Hillary Bennet, who I heard recently). If we imagine our mental health as being the capacity to cope with life's challenges and then we visualise that as a bucket and the demands in our lives as holes in the bucket. The more demands we have, the more holes we have in our bucket! And the more likely we are to drain our bucket. We are more likely to get stressed, to feel overwhelmed when our capacity to handle challenges is exceeded by the demands in our lives. So perhaps our biggest challenge in life is to look after our bucket and keep it full. Doing this helps us to cope with situations in daily life. We all migrate with different sizes and strengths of bucket (migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, international students and people from long term settled communities) and then depending on our settlement experiences such as our ability to find work that is fulfilling and financially rewarding, our buckets become drained or replenished. Some of our life experiences can also have an impact on the size and strength of our bucket. The company we keep is important too, If we are around someone who is depressed or unhappy and helps themselves to what's in our bucket, we can feel drained.

Women in particular are at risk of developing mental health problems and disorders because of life events; social isolation; violence and abuse; childhood sex abuse; domestic violence and their roles as mothers and carers. There are groups who are further at risk such as older women, women who are lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, migrants, prostitutes, offenders, users of drugs and alcohol. Some of the things that make us unwell when we migrate are racism, the loss of family and social networks, language barriers, uncertainty over the future and social isolation. Socio-economic adversity, such as having poor housing, being poor and unemployed and being socially and culturally isolated because of our religion and language can also be a risk. These stressors can lead to family problems such as domestic violence, suicide, self-harm, eating disorders and depression. While for some groups of refugees and asylum seekers post-traumatic stress disorder related to experiences of torture or abuse and separation from family members can stop people from leading full lives.

The news isn't all bad though; many migrants forge new identities and coping strategies and develop new positive skills as a result of migration. However, research does tell us that migrants can be slow to take up mental health services when they need them. As someone who has worked in this area, I suggest that people need the help of mental health services when they have tried everything to manage the problem and are still unable to make things better and it becomes distressing and disabling. Many migrants come from backgrounds that make them unsure or even afraid of using services like mental health services because there is sometimes a stigma to mental illness. Other factors can include not knowing what services can do for you. We might feel intimidated by our own language and communication concerns; having a lack of accessible information or lacking confidence in the services and perhaps be concerned about

confidentiality. When we eventually access a service, we might be dissatisfied with what is available, feeling misdiagnosed, misunderstood and ignored or like our cultural and spiritual needs have not been met.

Increasingly in New Zealand there is a big move to ensure that communities have the opportunity to have more of a say in the health care that is available to them. Staff are being encouraged to develop skills for working inter-culturally as New Zealand becomes more diverse. People migrate because they believe they will have a better life in their new country than if they stay in the old. However change is difficult and we need to be brave and step up and take advantage of the choices available to us if we find we need help. One of the great things about our new country is that all these services are there to help us fill up our bucket! So let's make sure that we keep our buckets full, ourselves, with family help and, when you need it, with professional help and support. We came here for a better life not a sadder one!